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ABSTRACT

Helping school, district, and/or community leaders facilitate discussions with community members about improving schools, this guide discusses how to use informal focus groups to gather information about what is important to people in the school community. The guide helps users gather information in a systematic way, organize what they hear, report the information back to the community, and use it to guide school changes. After an introduction, sections of the guide are: Sponsoring Do-It-Yourself Focus Groups; How to Select a Facilitator; Logistics for Hosting Do-It-Yourself Focus Groups; How to Recruit Participants; Sample Conversation Guide; How to Analyze Results of Do-It-Yourself Focus Groups; and How to Report Back to the Community and Turn Your Findings into Action. Samples of summary information, a recruitment letter, an rsvp card, and a phone message are attached. (RS)

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DO-IT-YOURSELF FOCUS GROUPS

A Low-Cost Way to Listen to Your Community

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IS THIS GUIDE FOR YOU?

It is if you are:

- A school, district or community leader interested in having discussions with your community members about improving schools
- Looking for a low-cost but systematic way to gather information about public opinions on education
- Prepared to act on what you hear from your community.

DO-IT-YOURSELF FOCUS GROUPS

A Low-Cost Way to Listen to Your Community

June 1997

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The mission of the Education Commission of the States (ECS) is to help state leaders develop and carry out policies that promote improved performance of the education system, as reflected in increased learning by all citizens.

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A NOTE FROM THE AUTHORS

Not long ago, educators had the public's permission to make decisions about the direction schools should take so children could learn. Many parents and some community members would listen as teachers and administrators gave them information. They would listen, nod, then go about their own lives, trusting that educators knew best.

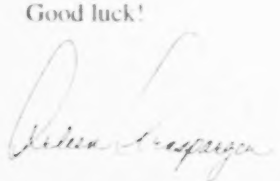
That was then . . . this is now. Today, parents and many community members are asking to have a strong voice in determining the direction schools take. They are doing the talking and asking educators to listen and respond to their questions and concerns and include them as partners in making decisions that affect their children and the future of their communities. School, district and state leaders across the country are learning that they need to actively involve their communities if they want to improve schools significantly.

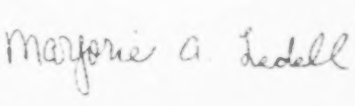
Public opinion surveys show that public concern for the quality of education is at an all-time high. A recent national poll conducted by the Education Commission of the States (ECS) shows that a majority of the nation's voters want major changes in public schools. And ECS' work in states, with the New American Schools effort and other education improvement initiatives, has confirmed for us that community members have experiences, ideas and energy to bring to the task of improving student learning.

There are many ways to learn what is on people's minds, including formal research methods and informal conversations (or what we call "do-it-yourself focus groups"). These informal conversations are built on a simple, direct approach — if you want to know what people are thinking, just ask them! While they do not take the place of formal, research-based focus groups, do-it-yourself focus groups can give you valuable information about what is important to people in your school community, what changes they want to see in their schools and how they want to participate in making decisions about those changes. They will help you gather information in a systematic way, organize what you hear and use it to guide school changes.

We urge you to take seriously people's needs to be heard on the subject of education, to be well-served by their schools and to have some voice in determining the direction their schools take. And we hope *Do-It-Yourself Focus Groups: A Low-Cost Way To Listen To Your Community* will be a valuable tool to help you build partnerships with people in your community.

Good luck!





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INTRODUCTION

This guide is designed to help school, district and/or community leaders facilitate discussions with community members about improving schools. These discussions will help you "take the pulse" of your community and better understand what is important to a variety of people in regard to their schools.

Listening and responding to your community are vital elements in an effective communications strategy. And a comprehensive, strategic communications strategy is a necessary component to all school and district efforts to improve student learning.

TO CREATE A STRATEGIC COMMUNICATIONS PLAN

- Develop a comprehensive education improvement plan and accompanying communications plan.
- Use polls and focus groups to surface public concerns and questions about education. You must know what community members see as problems in schools before you present solutions.
- Identify groups and/or individuals who need to be involved. Create key messages that respond to distinct groups, yet communicate consistently about the proposed changes.
- Develop examples and materials. People need the chance to see rather than just hear about changes in schools.
- Build coalitions. Enlist and maintain the support of influential business and community leaders who can marshal resources behind your efforts to improve achievement.
- Anticipate, respond to and involve critics. You must be ready to answer their concerns and benefit from their constructive criticism.
- Communicate progress. Community members need to see movement toward the finish line.

For more help in developing a communications strategy, call the Education Commission of the States at 303-299-3692 and ask for *Building Community Support for Schools: A Practical Guide to Strategic Communications.* Ask for Publication No. AN-97-3, $10.00 per copy, plus postage and handling.

This guide will help you:

- Reach out to your community members.
- Gather information about public opinion in a systematic way.
- Record that information in an objective way (rather than depend on the interpretation of individuals in the room).
- Report findings to your community.
- Provide a credible, consistent method for learning what is important to people in your school community.

We have learned from colleagues in school districts that the strategy recommended in this guide is far more effective than holding a series of disconnected conversations without tracking the results of those conversations.

Formal Focus Groups or "Do-It-Yourself" Informal Focus Groups?

This guide to do-it-yourself focus groups draws from the methodology researchers use when they conduct "formal focus groups." **Formal focus groups** are an excellent tool to use in collecting qualitative data to complement quantitative research that gives you information to guide your work. In formal focus groups, representative participants are selected by a research organization based on demographics of the groups whose opinions are being solicited; the moderator directs a very controlled discussion.

Do-it-yourself focus groups (which we refer to throughout this guide simply as "focus groups") depend less on formal research techniques and more on spontaneous, interactive dialogues between the facilitator and participants and also among participants themselves. They are a valuable low-cost strategy to help people understand one another. They involve 7-12 people who meet in a nonthreatening environment and have guided discussions on predetermined subjects. There are several desired outcomes:

- Participants leave the discussion with a better understanding of different points of view.
- Participants have an opportunity to share what is important to them with school and community leaders.
- Focus-group sponsors learn what people in the community think about the schools and what ideas they have for change.
- Sponsors use the information gained to help guide their work in the schools. They also inform community members about what they have learned.

Participants are invited in a more random manner than for formal focus groups used in research and do not necessarily represent the full demographic range of a community.

Do-it-yourself focus groups do not replace formal focus groups, but are a valuable addition to more formal focus group research.

REMEMBER: When you ask people to tell you what they think about and want in their schools, they assume something will change as a result of their comments. Therefore, do not undertake this strategy unless you intend to use what you learn to become more responsive to your community. It IS critical that you act on information you gather.

To use this guide as a training tool:

Though this guide is designed to help people carry out their own community conversations, you also might consider using it to train facilitators who then can be available to conduct these conversations in their own or neighboring communities.

SPONSORING DO-IT-YOURSELF FOCUS GROUPS

You need focus groups if you:

- Know who your few supporters and critics are, but are unsure of what the much larger group of less vocal people in your community really think. (This is the BIG ONE.)
- Realize getting people to "buy-in" to school leaders' predetermined course of action will fail in the long run because many people genuinely want to have a voice in what schools do.
- Need to see if the words you are using to describe your work are being heard and understood.

You should <u>not</u> conduct focus groups if you:

- Are not going to take comments seriously and change what you are doing as a result of what you hear. (This is another BIG ONE.)
- Regard community input as just a check-off item, instead of a process to add value to what you are doing.
- Are sure that if you talk and reason with people long enough, everyone will ultimately agree with you.
- Believe those persons who disagree with you just need to be "educated."
- Believe the only worthwhile opinions to consider are from people who have a comprehensive grasp of the total complexity of schooling.

This guide will help you:

- Find out what is on people's minds about schools.
- Identify words and language that better communicate messages and behaviors so everyone will be better heard and understood.
- Anticipate, respond and benefit from criticism before it becomes controversy.
- Capture diverse opinions to help you see issues from a variety of perspectives. This will lay the groundwork for building awareness, understanding, support and advocacy for public education and the need to improve it.
- Be more comfortable hearing opinions very different from yours, so you can clarify what the major issues and concerns are.
- Develop short- and long-term strategies to strengthen your communications efforts.

Below are answers to some commonly asked questions about focus groups:

Q What are do-it-yourself focus groups?

A They are a low-cost, structured way to listen to your community, internally and externally. The conversations among 7-12 people over a 90-minute or two-hour period are guided by an objective, trained facilitator using a predetermined set of questions.

Q Are do-it-yourself focus groups the same as formal focus groups?

A The structure of do-it-yourself focus groups follows the formal focus group model used by professional public opinion researchers. Unlike formal focus groups, the recruitment process for do-it-yourself focus groups does not guarantee that each conversation will include a representative sample of a larger group. The format does, however, provide for more spontaneous, interactive dialogue among participants.

Q Who should be a facilitator?

A Someone who is seen as objective and who has had experience in facilitating groups. Many communities find more success with facilitators who do not work for the school district or who come from neighboring communities. (See How to Select a Facilitator on page 7.)

Q Are focus groups a way to set up meetings where I can present information about school improvement efforts and other positive aspects of what we do and "let" people ask me questions? In other words, can I use these groups as a way to get "buy-in" from the public?

A No. Do-it-yourself focus groups revolve around a predetermined set of questions so you can get a qualitative, spontaneous, objective reading on what randomly selected people think about your school(s) (or specific initiatives pertaining to student achievement, math programs or whatever you would develop questions about). No presentation of material is made, unless it is simply to demonstrate something you will ask participants to respond to (e.g., you could give people report cards and test folders to get their opinion of what they would do to improve the information parents receive). If you want to hold conversations preceded by presentations, that is a whole different approach and persuasive in nature. Those types of conversations are held in schoolwide meetings, committee meetings (site-based councils, PTAs, etc.) and coffees where school personnel set the agenda.

Q What can I learn from focus groups?

A Through focus groups, you get an idea of how various people in your community feel about your schools based on a set of questions you prepare in advance.

Q How are the conversations set up?

A The questions are asked by an objective facilitator. Participants answer verbally, through interaction with other participants and often through written responses to the facilitator. Many times a recorder works with the facilitator to help capture the dialogue, and/or the session is audiotaped. (If you have the equipment, you also may want to videotape the session. While a video record can be helpful, you must get signed releases from each participant allowing themselves to be videotaped, and be very clear about how the video will and will not be used. Be aware that sometimes the knowledge of being videotaped inhibits people's discussions.) The facilitator uses the audiotape, videotape (if available), recorder's notes, and his/her own notes and reflections to prepare a summary of the information. To give you an idea of how the conversations can unfold on a variety of issues, we have included more outcomes (see pages 13-17) than you can comfortably cover in 90 minutes or two hours. We recommend that you limit the number of desired outcomes so people feel they have had adequate time to discuss each.

Q What is in a focus group summary?

A The summary consists of tallies of questions that called for a show of hands; answers on the response forms; overview of the discussion and general observations; and notable quotes which illustrate an observation particularly well. To ensure accuracy in your summary, refer to the audio- and/or videotape as you prepare your report. (Assure participants of confidentiality and that their comments will not be attributed to individuals by name.)

Q What does it cost to conduct focus groups?

A It is assumed facilitators will be volunteers or accept a minimal project fee ($100-$200) for themselves or their organization. Food and facility costs depend on each location. You also may choose to offer participants a nominal fee ($25-$50) as an incentive to participate.

Q Whom do I call to find out more about do-it-yourself focus groups or be trained in how to conduct them?

A For more information about do-it-yourself focus groups or to ask about training, call or write Arleen Arnsparger at the Education Commission of the States (ECS), 707 17th Street, Suite 2700, Denver, CO 80202-3427, 303-299-3653; aarnsparger@ecs.org; or Marjorie Ledell, 8828 238th Street, NW, No. B-2, Edmonds, WA 98026, 206-771-8423; mledell@slc.shorelin.wed.net.edu.

How to select a facilitator

Role of the facilitator:

The facilitator's role is to guide a discussion around specific, predetermined subjects, in an objective, respectful manner. The facilitator's greatest challenge will be to be seen by participants as an objective and effective conversation leader.

Though the conversation should be audiotaped and/or videotaped to provide a record of the discussion, the facilitator also may serve as the recorder, noting participants' comments and keeping track of the results of votes taken on specific questions. It is helpful for facilitators to work in pairs. This "buddy system" allows one person to facilitate the discussion, the other to take notes and handle other meeting logistics. The "buddy" also can help the partner leading the discussion improve his/her skills by offering constructive comments to the discussion leader after participants leave.

The facilitator should be:

- A skilled, objective listener
- Comfortable and familiar with group processes
- Able to create and maintain the group's enthusiasm and interest
- Informed about the background and expectations of the people or group sponsoring the focus groups
- Familiar with focus-group objectives and expected outcomes.

Ideally, a facilitator should be an objective person from outside the school or district, although he or she could be from within the education community. **This individual should receive training in how to be a good facilitator.** Facilitating focus groups requires a different approach than simply guiding conversations. In the training we have conducted to develop this guide, participants consistently have recognized the need for facilitation training to help them effectively carry out do-it-yourself focus groups.

How to find a good facilitator:

Some possibilities include: a local business or religious institution that can suggest names of people they use as facilitators; the League of Women Voters or other organizations respected within your community; the regional education agency that provides training and technical assistance to schools, such as boards of cooperative education services or regional education service units. You might have to offer a nominal fee or contribution to the organization providing the facilitators. Some of these organizations also offer facilitation training.

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Qualities to look for in a facilitator:

A facilitator should be comfortable being objective in a conversation about education. She or he should be able to listen to diverse points of view and possible inaccurate perceptions without interrupting the conversation to challenge or correct statements made by participants. The facilitator should be able to maintain a neutral expression regardless of what is said by participants and should be able to avoid becoming defensive if a participant criticizes the schools or district. (Most of us find these approaches very difficult — that's one of the reasons facilitation training is so important!)

Ideally, the facilitator also should be someone unknown to the participants and should not be viewed as someone with a particular point of view to advocate or as a representative of the schools. The facilitator should be skilled at "managing" a conversation, ensuring that ground rules (see page 9) are followed and that everyone participates. The facilitator should be able to ask probing questions that bring out participants' opinions, attitudes and concerns.

FACILITATOR DO'S

As a facilitator, do:

- Follow the discussion outline and activities as designed in a consistent manner from group to group; use the same questions in each session.
- Use a neutral, yet comfortable and inviting tone of voice and facial expressions.
- Ask questions to clarify participants' points and increase understanding of each point made by participants.
- Ensure that each participant contributes throughout the conversation.
- Give people time to think by using pauses whenever needed. Be comfortable with silences.
- Be respectful of all points of view and instruct those in the group to do the same. Remind people that this is not a debate or an attempt to reach consensus on any issue. It is merely a vehicle for people to express their opinions and perceptions about specific issues so that the persons initiating the conversations can learn what is important to their community members, what is understood or not understood by community members, and what the community thinks about various issues.
- Use plain language.
- Keep the discussion moving to stay within the specified timeframe.

FACILITATOR'S DON'TS

As a facilitator, don't:

- Try to guide the participants to your own conclusions.
- Share your own opinion or point of view or experiences.
- Dominate the conversation.
- Criticize or ridicule anyone's comments or allow anyone in the group to do so.
- Challenge the accuracy of participants' knowledge or views.
- Translate education jargon. (If someone asks what a term means, ask the individual using it to explain what he or she means by the term, then ask others if that definition matches their interpretation; this gives information about how terminology the schools are using is understood — or not understood — by community members.)
- Interpret participants' comments for the group.
- Give answers about the education issues being discussed. This is not a forum for participants to gain information, but for you to learn what they do and do not understand.

At each focus group, the facilitator should establish ground rules with participants and ask the group to help ensure that these rules are honored. Limit discussion about ground rules to five minutes so you do not lose time needed for the conversation. Suggested ground rules follow. You might list these, then ask if the group would like to delete or add any. It is also helpful to post the ground rules in the room on a flipchart or taped to the wall, so you can refer to them when necessary.

GROUND RULES

- Respect all views and resist the urge to convert others to your viewpoint.
- Be courteous when speaking and listening.
- Be brief and talk in plain language.
- Allow everyone an equal opportunity to express their views.
- Respond first to questions the facilitator asks and then offer any additional comments.
- Everyone is responsible for ensuring that everyone is heard and understood.

Tasks for facilitators:

- ☐ Work with sponsors to select a location and visit the site; ask for one long table to accommodate 7-12 people so they can see one another and be sure comfortable chairs are available.
- ☐ Work with sponsors to arrange for child care.
- ☐ Work with sponsors to select participants. Aim for a group of 7-12 people. Fewer than six or more than 14 people make effective conversation difficult.
- ☐ If a small budget is available, offer people an incentive to participate. Some groups offer a meal or small amount of money to each individual. If an organization is recruiting for you, consider offering the organization a small donation.
- ☐ Work with sponsors to develop a conversation guide (see page 13 for a "Sample Conversation Guide". Be sure you are familiar with this guide before the focus group meets.
- ☐ Make copies of response forms or any other materials you will use.
- ☐ Compile complete list of participants.
- ☐ Have checks or cash ready to give participants (optional) and expense forms to fill out and return to you if you are reimbursing participants for expenses.
- ☐ Take name tags, markers, pens, notepads, masking tape, table cards for people's names.
- ☐ Work with sponsors to arrange for flip charts, food and drinks.
- ☐ Take list of ground rules to review with participants.
- ☐ Arrange for audiotaping; take microphone(s), tape recorder, tapes, extra batteries and extension cords.
- ☐ Make sure to gather all materials (flip charts, response forms, etc.) from the session.
- ☐ Provide a timeframe for reporting findings.

LOGISTICS FOR HOSTING DO-IT-YOURSELF FOCUS GROUPS

Location:

Do-it-yourself focus groups should be held off the school grounds in a quiet room where the conversation will not be interrupted. Possible sites include a meeting room in a hotel, restaurant, church, public library or office building. Focus groups used for research often are held in specially designed facilities with a one-way mirror so participants can be observed by others and videotaped. Facilitators and the sponsoring school or district should work together to find an appropriate location that offers easy access by car and mass transportation.

Scheduling:

You will be more successful recruiting participants if you schedule evening groups. Each session should be no more than 90 minutes to two hours in length.

Logistics Checklist:

- ☐ Quiet meeting room.
- ☐ One table and comfortable chairs set up to encourage good interaction among participants and allow each participant to see and be seen by the facilitator.
- ☐ A tape recorder and omni-directional microphone in center of table or multiple microphones.
- ☐ Name tags or name tents for participants to place on the table.
- ☐ Easel with markers or white board and markers in the room.
- ☐ Child care on site.
- ☐ Appropriate food for the time of day — snacks, drinks, sandwiches if during a meal. Set up a separate table. Ask people to stay for the duration of the conversation, except when a bathroom break is needed.
- ☐ Plan to pay each participant from $25-$50 or offer a donation to a group from which the participants will be drawn. You might determine that pay will not be necessary and people will be willing to volunteer their time.

Reminders for facilitator:

- ☐ Arrive early to make necessary preparations.
- ☐ Review the facilitator's guide.
- ☐ Test all audiovisual equipment you will be using.

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How to recruit participants

When doing formal focus groups for qualitative research, the participant selection process involves sampling a targeted group of individuals — using methodology to select people according to the purpose of the research. For do-it-yourself focus groups, the sponsoring school or district leader should identify participants in as methodical a way as possible.

Decide which groups of people you want to hear from. For example: teachers, African-American parents, white parents, businesspeople, etc. Divisions could be made by occupation, social class, age, family characteristics, ethnicity or child's grade level. It works best to keep each group as alike or similar as possible, according to the criteria you have set for that group. For example, researchers have learned that mixing ethnicity and/or economic status in the same group often is a barrier to open dialogue. Others, however, have found that mixing parents whose children are in different grade levels can be a plus. Elementary parents alone often have too limited a perspective on various issues you want to discuss. We recommend hosting two focus group sessions per group of people you decide you want to hear from to get a more accurate snapshot of where the community stands.

- When focus groups are set up, facilitators should work with the sponsors to select a cross-section of people not already visible in the community. For example, you might look to membership lists of PTAs or PTOs, chambers of commerce, Rotary Clubs, American Association of University Women, local garden clubs, and also to any public list such as county clerk records of registered voters.
- The traditional view of parents should be expanded to include grandparents, guardians, step-parents, foster parents, etc. Facilitators should be sure their language does not exclude or demonstrate a bias about the role of the "parent."

Within a predefined group, participants should be randomly selected. Do not hand pick participants to reflect your own personal bias on the education issues to be discussed. This will make the information you collect of little or no use, and it will have zero credibility with anyone receiving the information you gather. Deliberately seek out the unfamiliar faces.

How to contact participants (to be done by facilitator, school or district personnel):

- Send invitation letter with stamped, self-addressed RSVP card (see sample on page 25) one to two weeks ahead of the focus group date.
- Make a reminder phone call or send a reminder post card (see sample phone message on page 25). You must make personal contact with enough people to ensure that you will have a sufficient number to go ahead with the group. Over-recruit!! You can always pay people or feed them and send them home if you don't need them.

SAMPLE CONVERSATION GUIDE

Facilitator might want to write notes periodically on a flip chart to help participants see as well as hear the questions, their answers and confirm that the facilitator is capturing ideas accurately.

OUTLINE

- Welcome
- Purpose of conversation and expected outcomes (you might want to post these) (see section on outcomes below)
- Describe follow-up participants can expect
- Introductions
- Go over materials handed out
- Go over process for getting drinks, taking a break, getting paid and/or getting reimbursed for travel expenses
- Discuss format of the conversation
- Proceed with questions
- Finish on time.

Suggested Outcomes

NOTE: As we indicated in an earlier section, in order to give you an idea of how the conversations can unfold on a variety of issues, we have included more outcomes than you can comfortably cover in 90 minutes or two hours. We recommend that you limit the number of outcomes so people feel they have had adequate time to discuss each.

OUTCOME 1: We will better understand how people feel about how schools are doing and about how their child's school in particular is doing.

1. Are public schools getting better or worse? (Ask for a show of hands and record the results.) If better, what do you see that tells you this? If worse, what do you see that tells you this?
2. What are public schools' strengths?
3. What are their weaknesses?
4. Are the schools in this community (name community) getting better or worse?
5. What are their strengths?

6. What are their weaknesses?
7. What do you need to see to know that schools are improving? Test scores go up? Dropout rates decrease? College admission rates go up? Districtwide or statewide test scores increase? Reports that schools are safer? Teachers more involved and excited about the schools? Students more involved and excited about school? Other?
8. How would you describe your relationship with your child's school? What's good about it? What's not good?
9. When you go to the school, how are you greeted?
10. How often do you hear from your child's teachers? For what reasons?
11. Can you reach your child's teacher when you need to?
12. Does your school do a good job of keeping you informed about what is happening and/or involved in what is going on? What other ways would you like your school to communicate with you?
13. Are you familiar with the site-based decisionmaking council (if applicable)? Are you involved in any decisionmaking about school policies and practices?
14. What do you think people who are not involved with public schools at this time think about them?

OUTCOME 2: We will have an idea of how well people understand what the school is doing and how they explain their work.

Q Have you ever heard of the following terms? What do you think they mean? (If nothing, that's fine. Facilitator does not have to define or explain. Test terms frequently used by school personnel.)

1. Education reform
2. Standards
3. Portfolio assessment
4. Accountability

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Facilitator should develop a response form that includes components that are part of current school improvement efforts. See sample below:

Response Form

How important is each of the following components in increasing student learning? Please rank them in order of importance to you from 1 to 12.

___ High academic standards are set.

___ All students will meet higher standards. (All students, regardless of background or ability, will be enabled to reach higher standards, no matter what it takes.)

___ Curriculum stresses the basics plus more advanced skills.

___ The school is safe and orderly.

___ Students adhere to dress codes.

___ Teachers have more control and responsibility in school management and deciding curriculum.

___ Teachers continue training and professional development.

___ Educators are held accountable and judged on whether their students score better on various measures.

___ Parents are partners in making decisions about their child's learning.

___ Community and social responsibility is an important value for the schools to teach.

___ Students learning by doing ("hands-on" approach to learning).

___ Computers and other technology are important tools for learning and communication.

OUTCOME 3: We will have an idea of how well people understand standards.

1. Do we have high standards in our schools now? How have you come to this conclusion?
2. Do we need higher standards?
3. When people talk about standards, what do you think they are talking about?
4. What is your reaction to the idea that ALL students can achieve higher standards? If you agree, why do you believe this? If you do not agree, why not? What gets in the way of all students achieving high standards?
5. Do you think public schools should set higher standards for ALL students?
6. Do you know what [state school or district's name] current standards are?
7. Do you know what standards your child is expected to meet?
8. How do you know if your child is meeting high standards? What are the indicators? What do you see and hear that makes you think your child is or is not meeting high standards?

OUTCOME 4: We will better understand how schools and parents know what students are learning.

1. Do you know what your child is expected to learn in school?
2. Do you know how your child is learning these things? Do you want to know more? Are you able to get this information?
3. How do you know if he or she is learning what is expected? What do you see and hear that gives you this information?
4. What else do you need to know to judge whether your child is learning what he/she should?
5. What do you think is the best way to know whether your child is learning? Grades? Test scores? Portfolios? Seeing your child's homework? Your child's attitude toward school? A combination of these? Other?
6. What do you need to see to know that your child is learning more? Test scores go up? Grades go up? Your child knows the basics better? Your child's interest in schoolwork goes up? Other?

OUTCOME 5: We will have a better idea of what participants understand about "the learning environment."

1. Describe what an ideal classroom would look like and sound like if learning were going on.
2. Is this ideal classroom different from the classroom you experienced as a student? How is it different? Should today's classroom be different than it used to be? Why or why not?

OUTCOME 6: We will better understand parents' relationship with their schools and how they want to be involved?

1. In what ways does your school make it possible to be involved? Teacher conferences? Committees? PTA or PTO? Other?
2. Do you receive any guidance from your school so you are better able to help your child learn? Do you know how you can be helpful?
3. In what ways would you like to be involved? With your child? With the school?
4. Do you think the school makes it easy for you to be more involved? Given the opportunity, would you want to do more?
5. What does "being involved" mean to you?

OUTCOME 7: Find out how participants' priorities for their schools compare with the district's priorities.

Facilitator should hand out a form similar to the sample below:

Response Form

List your 3-5 current priorities for the schools and district and rank these in order of importance to you. Then list the 3-5 current priorities you think the district has. Rank these in order of importance to you. What would you add to the district's priorities? Delete? Would you replace them with your priorities or any others suggested tonight?

OUTCOME 8: We will learn whether we are using the right communication vehicles to reach different segments of the community.

1. What are your sources of information about the schools? (Use show of hands and record results.) Teachers? Students? Other parents? School administrators? Business leaders? Newspapers? Political leaders? Radio and TV? Other?

How to analyze results of do-it-yourself focus groups

To be completed by facilitator:

A. Tally response forms and, where appropriate, list responses in order of importance. You can compare responses among groups or with other data collected through surveys and focus groups inside and outside your district. If you hold similar discussions periodically (we would urge you to do this!), you can track changes in public attitudes on these issues.

B. Group the answers under the outcomes identified in the questionnaire the facilitator follows. You can draw conclusions from the information you see.

C. Write an overview, highlighting the key findings and main conclusions you can draw from participants' responses. (See sample summary on page 20.)

D. Make recommendations from the findings. For example, if the responses you received tell you the issues that are important in your community are not being addressed by changes you are making in your schools, you have a mismatch. You can make recommendations about (a) rethinking changes that are under way, (b) involving more people in making decisions about the changes that are to be made, or (c) showing people that the changes under way address the concerns they have put forth. As we said earlier, it IS critical that you act on information you gather.

   If you see distinct differences between the responses given by different groups, point that out in your report.

E. Consider preparing a BRIEF oral presentation with visuals to accompany written report to school or district leaders.

How to report back to the community and turn your findings into action

To be carried out by school or district sponsoring the conversations:

A. Make entire report available to participants, community members, sponsors of the community conversations, superintendent, school board members, etc.

   NOTE: Your report is public information so anyone who requests it should receive it. You may consider a nominal fee if you receive a large number of requests.

B. Highlights of the report (a VERY brief summary) should go to key people — media; internal publics such as teachers', administrators' and classified employees' associations; external groups such as leaders in business, churches and synagogues; civic and senior citizen groups; higher education institutions; etc.

C. Send a thank-you letter to each focus group participant. If the results are summarized within several days (that's the goal!), include report in the letter.

D. Consider offering formal presentations to various groups.

E. In the reports to various segments of the community, spell out how the school or district will use the information. Be specific about what changes and/or improvements will be made to respond to issues and concerns raised by conversation participants. Report back later with results of those changes. Keep in mind that, while people will appreciate the opportunity to be heard through these conversations, they also will expect that school or district leaders will take their comments seriously and do something to respond. To emphasize what we advised at the beginning of this guide: ONLY HOST THESE CONVERSATIONS IF YOU INTEND TO TAKE ACTION BASED ON WHAT YOU HEAR! If you ask people to share their views and do not take action, you will do more harm than good to your relationships with community members.

SAMPLES

Example of Summary of Information (To be prepared by facilitator)

Focus Group Report for (name of community)

Prepared by: (facilitator name and phone number)

Eight participants, parents or guardians of students in our district (or school) took part in informal focus groups about education issues on (date) at (place). The guided discussion was structured around two outcomes (an outcome is a statement of what you want to accomplish with the focus group):

1. We will better understand parents' relationship with their schools and how they want to be involved.
2. We will learn how participants' priorities for their schools compare with the district's priorities.

This report is organized around five questions asked, tally of hand votes on specific questions, summary response sheets, summary of discussion, notable quotes and highlights of common themes.

Five questions used by the facilitator to guide discussion:

1. What ways does your school make it possible to be involved? Teacher conferences? Committees? PTA or PTO? Other?
2. Do you receive any guidance from your school so you are better able to help your child learn? Do you know how you can be helpful? (asked for show of hands)
3. In what ways would you like to be involved? With your child? With the school?
4. Do you think the school makes it easy for you to be more involved? Given the opportunity, would you want to do more? (asked for show of hands)
5. What does "being involved" mean to you?

Tallies for show of hands:

Question 2:

- Two participants indicated they receive some guidance from the school to help their child learn; six indicated they do not receive any guidance.
- Four people indicated they know how to be helpful; two of the four were the same people as the two who believe they receive some guidance from school. Four indicated they do not know how they can be helpful in their child's learning.

Question 4:

- One person indicated that she thinks the school makes it easy to be involved — the same person who indicated she received some guidance from the school about how to be helpful in her child's learning (Question 2). Seven participants indicated they do not think the school makes it easy.
- All eight indicated they want to be more involved.

Response Sheet Summary

The response form from Outcome 2 said: List your 3-5 priorities for the schools and district and rank these in order of importance to you. Then list the 3-5 current priorities you think the district has. Rank these in order of importance to you. What would you add to the district's priorities? Delete? Would you replace them with your priorities or any others suggested tonight?

- Personal priorities mentioned most often were: high academic achievement, safety, discipline, technology, excellent teaching staff and good extracurricular activities, including sports and music.
- Priorities listed for the district included improving test scores, strengthening teaching staff and reducing class sizes. Participants did not want to delete any from this list, but wanted to add: repair and update buildings, make better use of buses so they are not operating with only one or two students on them, and reduce the number of administrators so there will be more money to fix up buildings.

Summary of Discussion

Generally, participants want to be more involved in their child's school, particularly in relation to helping their child learn, i.e., parents are looking for ways they can help at home to reinforce what is being taught at school. Participants said they usually do not know what academic expectations are for the year or what will be taught, but consider this essential knowledge to being involved. The school should provide this knowledge, they said.

Participants also were interested in serving on committees and in the PTA but do not consider such service as helping with student learning. Instead, they see such service as a general way of supporting the school. Participants said teacher conferences are short and they usually do not get a chance to raise what is on their minds. Participants also expressed significant frustration about always having to take off from work to go to the school for teacher conferences or other meetings. Additionally, virtually all participants said they are frustrated and offended by educators' use of education jargon and lack of genuine listening.

In short, participants said being involved means being knowledgeable about the academic expectations schools have for their children and about how they can help at home. And, the school staff should take the initiative and be more flexible on when to meet with parents and guardians.

Notable Quotes

- "Why do I always have to take off work to go to teacher conferences? I have a job too, but I can't take off whenever I want."
- "The school only wants me to be involved if I bring food for the teachers when they have an inservice day."
- "When I call the teacher, I never get her on the phone. Why doesn't the school have voice mail and a phone for each teacher?"
- "Just once, I would like to go to a parent/teacher conference where I get time to ask questions about what I believe is important for my child."

Highlights of Common Themes

- The school staff and parents have a different idea of what "involvement" is.
- Parents think the school should do more to welcome them as partners in helping students learn, not just people to be boosters for the school's image.
- Parents do not want anything fancy in education; they just want solid academic learning in a safe, disciplined environment.

If you have questions regarding this report, please let me know. I hope this information is helpful.

SAMPLE RECRUITMENT LETTER

Date]

[Name and address of participant]

Dear [first name of participant]:

Thank you for agreeing to contribute your time and thoughts to the [school/district name] focus groups about education issues at [time of day], [day and date] and [place]. Directions to [place] are enclosed, along with a stamped, self-addressed RSVP card to confirm your attendance and let us know if you plan to use the child care provided. [OPTIONAL: This letter also confirms that you will receive an (amount) fee at the end of the meeting.]

We are counting on you to help us gather information we can use to better serve the education needs of children in our community. If, for some reason, you find that you cannot make the meeting, please let [name of person] know at [phone number]. The meeting is structured based on an exact number of participants, so if you cannot attend, we will ask someone to take your place.

If you have any questions, please call [name of person] at the number listed in the previous paragraph. Otherwise, you can expect a confirmation call from us on [day or date].

Sincerely,

[name and title of person]

Encls.

P.S. Thanks again for making the time to help us serve our children better. We value your contribution.

SAMPLE RSVP CARD

Focus Groups About Education

(Day, date, time)

[NOTE: If you will be getting cards back from people invited to one of several sessions, make sure you specify which session on the RSVP card.]

_____ Yes, I will attend the meeting.
_____ No, I will not attend the meeting.
_____ Yes, I will need child care for [number] of children age _____
_____ No, I will not need child care.

NAME: _____

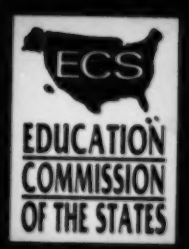
PHONE NUMBER: _____
[day and evening]

SAMPLE PHONE MESSAGE

This is [name] calling to remind you about the do-it-yourself focus groups about education that you agreed to attend. It is at [time of day], [day and date], at [place]. We understand from your RSVP that you will need child care [if offered] for [number and ages of children] or will not need child care. (You will receive your [amount] fee at the end of the meeting.)

Do you have any questions? [if yes, answer; if no, repeat the fact that questions can be asked of (name of person) at (phone number)].

We appreciate your help and look forward to a lively, interesting conversation. Thank you.



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